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Toward a Processual Theory of Transformation

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1. Introduction

*Mother, mother
There's too many of you crying
Brother, brother, brother
There's far too many of you dying
You know we've got to find a way
To bring some lovin' here today*

*Father, father
We don't need to escalate
You see, war is not the answer
For only love can conquer hate
You know we've got to find a way
To bring some lovin' here today*

*Picket lines and picket signs
Don't punish me with brutality
Talk to me, so you can see
Oh, what's going on
What's going on
Yeah, what's going on*

--Marvin Gaye

Popular culture includes activities and commercial products that are created for, and consumed by, the mass market. It is a reference to widely disseminated ideas, products, and services such as movies, music, television shows, video games, books, celebrities, sports, fashion, and so on. Popular culture is also a reference to how consumers think, feel, act, and communicate with each other when consuming these products. Although not always the case, popular culture may be used for educating and promoting social change: encouraging empathetic understanding, disrupting stereotypes, spotlighting injustice, and challenging traditional narratives (Ironside, 2017). In this sense, popular culture has the potential to be progressive, essentially optimistic, opening the possibility for social change and the motivation to drive it (Fiske, 2010). How can we better understand, and mobilize, this potential?

The above lyrics by Marvin Gaye are an example of the intersection of popular culture and the promotion of social change. *What's Going On* spent 15 weeks on the Billboard's Hot 100 in 1971, peaking at number two for several weeks (Billboard, 1971). The lyrics were written to

raise consciousness of poverty, war, drug abuse and racial misunderstanding toward the end of the Vietnam War (Moon, 2000). *What' Going On* won the Billboard Trendsetter Award for, “promoting the cause of ecology through thought-provoking message songs” (Billboard, 1971 pg. 52). Although it is not unusual for popular culture to make a social impact, its ability to transform culture is under theorized within the consumer research and marketing communities. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to better understand the potential of popular culture by exploring it theoretically through the lens of transformative consumer research (TCR).

TCR is both theory- and practice-based academic research that examines individual, group, and societal level problems related to consumption and consumer culture, with the goal of enhancing consumer well-being (Ozanne et al., 2015). TCR is a broad and inclusive tradition encompassing many disciplines (e.g., sociology, anthropology, psychology, public policy, and gender studies) and contexts (e.g., poverty, globalization, vulnerable populations, urban design, and crisis management) with the goal of furthering social change. As such, TCR represents a progressive tendency in marketing and consumer research. Consistent with furthering social change, we propose a *processual theory* of transformation that arises from a *critical* understanding of popular culture cases.

Processual theories begin with the premise that culture is a dynamic historical construction that is continuously changing. Cultural products and phenomena emerge, develop, advance, and dissipate over time (Langley, 2009; Langley, et al., 2013). By integrating a temporal dimension to theorizing, one can better understand the gradual process of social development and change. Since social change is rarely instant and abrupt, processual theorizations have become increasingly popular in consumer and market research (Giesler and

Fischer, 2017; Giesler and Thompson, 2016). The next section examines the theoretical roots of popular culture as critique.

2. Popular Culture as Critique

Critical theory proposes that there are two types of critique. A *negative* critique focuses on what is wrong with society and a *positive* critique suggests avenues for social change so as to remedy what is wrong. When popular culture draws attention to what is wrong, or inspires possibilities for change, it releases a creative power. Most of critical theory, beginning with *One-Dimensional Man* by Herbert Marcuse (1964), argues that popular culture reinforces the status quo, preventing meaningful social change that may enhance well-being. Indeed, this may be the case for much of popular culture. However, other critical orientations, such as *cultural studies*, remain open to the possibility that popular culture has the potential to transform society for the better.

Cultural studies officially began with Richard Hoggart's (1957) *The Uses of Literacy* and the subsequent formation of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in 1964. Hoggart's (1957) use of the word *literacy* suggests that everyday culture is a discursive practice that can be appropriated, commercialized, and marketed to the masses. However, it can also become a language useful for interpreting lived experience, a public discourse proactively engaging and reflecting on the everyday. The intellectual leadership of Stuart Hall (1978), E.P. Thompson (1978), and Raymond Williams (1980) followed Hoggart's creative insights. These theorists rejected the high-culture/low-culture distinction, stressing a broad understanding and arguing that popular culture was also deep and complex. Empathetic understanding of culture can only be achieved through interpretation of thickly described cases or gradual immersion in the flow of ongoing practices. Agreeing on a single definition for *culture*, from this perspective,

is problematic in that culture is not just one thing. In fact, it would be more appropriate to identify simultaneous overlapping, or layers, of popular cultures—regional, gendered, racialized, national, neighborhood, and so on. This idea is best represented by their theories of subcultures, such as Dick Hebdige's (1979) theory of style, which differentiates and regionalizes cultures that have been constructed from the ground up. Hebdige's (1979) approach begins with a description of popular culture contexts; he then identifies common themes across contexts, and then finally, uses these themes to inspire theoretical insight. By emphasizing a complex, fragmented view of popular culture, Hebdige (1979) leaves open the possibility for new cultural practices. Some of these practices may encourage resistance and critical reflection, releasing the critical imagination.

The notion that culture is not one thing, but something complex and layered—a lived, ongoing practice—is further developed by the poststructural and postmodern theorists. This thinking, stemming from Agger (1992), Althusser (1970), Barthes (1975), Derrida (1978; 1981), and Lacan (1977), to name a few, has positioned cultural studies well for engaging in contemporary debates. Similar to Hoggart's (1957) use of literacy as a discursive practice, these theorists conceptualize culture as *text*. This conceptualization expands the boundaries of what is appropriate for cultural analysis to include all cultural performances and artifacts, from television and film, to social media and advertising, to all genres of art. Acknowledging that culture is phenomena characterized by heterogeneity, multiplicity, and heteroglossia recognizes that it is never reducible to a single interpretation. This destabilizes official narratives such as Marcuse's (1964) one-dimensionality thesis mentioned above. In addition, it suggests that there are always counter-interpretations and oppositional cultures. Indeed, according to Agger (1992, p. 35), the Frankfurt theorists eventually agreed that one-dimensionality could be cracked open with

alternative interpretations, new cultural constructions, and critical reflection. If the text is open, it is possible that consumers can see through the hegemonic fog of consumer culture and actively struggle to create new cultural experiences. This encourages the emancipatory impulse releasing the potential of popular culture.

Since researchers participating in the TCR movement engage with popular culture, and emphasize social change, a processual theory of transformation that arises from a critical analysis of popular culture cases will contribute to the tradition. Leaders of the TCR movement have recognized and developed potential directions for research that results in social change such as *revelatory, policy, participating, coalition, and incendiary* approaches (Mick, Pettigrew, Pechmann, and Ozanne, 2012). However, they have yet to construct a processual theory of social change that combines these directions and arises from consumer culture. The next section describes the method used to collect, categorize, and interpret a sample of popular culture cases.

3. Method: The Development of a Dialogical Approach to Positive Critique

An interpretive group was used for data collection. This group consisted of academics representing a variety of universities and disciplines from around the world. Since open communication leading to consensus, or dialogue, was at the core of our process, we call our method *dialogal*. Dialogue was the basis for each step in our research: making decisions about procedures, selecting cases of popular culture, sharing interpretations, abstracting interpretations into phenomena, and categorizing phenomena into themes. Inspired by Gadamer's (1976) hermeneutic method, we suggest that the context in which research happens is constituted by three levels of dialogue: 1) preliminary; 2) transitional; and 3) fundamental (Rowe, et al., 1989).

Preliminary dialogue consisted of sharing initial ideas related to popular culture as critique. As noted above, a negative critique raises awareness of social problems. A positive

critique focuses on how we can move forward by contributing to a solution for these problems. Examples of ideas emerging from preliminary group dialogue included: critique may help to express, or realize, cultural values; create a context that elevates awareness; encourages the discovery of meaning; or promotes care, compassion, empathy, and kindness. The group also discussed the importance of recognizing that detailed descriptions of cases are stories open to a range of interpretations. Our purpose was not to argue that these cases changed society for the better but to use thick description to gain insight into a theoretical process. Each participant in the group selected a commercially produced idea, product, or service that can generally be considered part of popular culture that engages in a negative or positive critique, then wrote a detailed description, or story, of the cultural context they selected. Ultimately, twelve stories were shared and further discussed with the group.

Transitional dialogue consisted of the process of translating, or abstracting, the cultural contexts into social phenomena. This helped the group better understand the essential structures, processes, practices, and experiences that manifest meaning. For example, many of the cultural contexts were designed to stir up emotions in the consumer. So the dialogal group asked: *how do different types of emotions contribute to a processual model of transformation?* Many of the cultural contexts were trying to teach the consumer something new. So, again, the dialogal group asked: *what role does a critical pedagogy play in a processual model of transformation?* And so forth. Consistent with the aims of cultural studies, phenomena were examined within a wider social and political context with respect to power and domination. Each participant developed and wrote a description abstracting their cultural context into phenomena. These descriptions were then shared with the group serving as an impetus for further dialogue. We should note that, at this point, theoretical explanations for the phenomena were not yet developed, although it was

a step in this direction. Developing an understanding of phenomena was transitional in the sense that it is between the cultural context and the theoretical explanation.

Fundamental dialogue took place in person. The interpretive group, representing three continents, converged on a single location for three days of open communication. Each participant shared with the group a description of their context and phenomenon. The group discussed similarities and differences among contexts and phenomena and began the process of categorizing contexts on the basis of similar phenomenon. For example, contexts that were using a negative critique to draw attention to the eclipse of key cultural values were grouped together. Contexts that provoked different types of emotions were grouped together. Contexts that were focusing on a more cognitive dimension were grouped together; and finally, contexts that were intervening in society in some way as a way of prompting structural or behavioral change were grouped together. These categories were then further analyzed taking into account a wider social and political context. In this way, the interpretive group could begin the process of theorizing. Each of these categories became key themes in the analysis and relevant social theories were used to enhance, refine, and explain these themes. As theories were used to augment and broaden the themes, subcategories began to emerge. For example, additional analyses resulted in different types of emotions, cognition, and interventions. Finally, the key themes were organized into a temporal sequence creating a processual model of transformation.

The next section presents our processual theory of transformation. Rather than presenting the thematic analyses of the contexts (i.e., emic analyses), then the theoretical development of these themes in a subsequent section (i.e., etic development), we chose to present each concept in our processual model in sequence, illuminating it with a subset of cases, then enhancing and

refining it with theoretical development. In this way, we better integrate, or tether, our analytical case analysis with the processual theory, creating a coherent and compelling story.

4. Toward a Processual Theory of Transformation

The purpose of this section is to describe the contextual and theoretical nuances of each conceptual category used to create our processual theory of transformation (See Figure 1).

-----Figure 1-----

Figure 1 begins with *contradictions*, and then moves to *emotions*, then *progressive literacy*, and finally, *praxis*. Each theme below uses cases (i.e., emic) and theories (i.e., etic) to describe the fine distinctions and subtle shading needed to enhance a full understanding of the specific phase. This processual theory, arising from an analysis of popular culture cases, is different from theories of social change typically found in critical theory. For example, there is more of an emphasis on lived experience and how structural inconsistencies lead to various types of emotions, the importance of a cognitive dimension, and how interactions between emotions and cognition ultimately change social practice. Differences between our processual theory and the contribution and value of this model for the TCR academic community will be further explored in the conclusion.

4.1 Contradictions

This is the first concept of our dialectical model. The ongoing process of social construction inevitably results in contradictions between lived experience and cultural values such as justice, equality, liberty, and freedom. These inconsistencies, or incompatibilities, may serve as potential ruptures in the fabric of social life. These disruptions, which make radical breaks with the present order possible, spark the process of transformation. Three popular culture cases help to contextualize this concept.

The first case is entitled *Before the Flood*. Directed by Fisher Stevens and featuring Leonardo DiCaprio as the UN Messenger of Peace for the Climate, this 2016 documentary film examines climate change (Goldenberg, 2016). National Geographic has provided the documentary free of charge reaching over 60 million people worldwide (Clavario, 2016). *Before the Flood* follows DiCaprio as he travels around the globe to witness the devastating effects of climate change. The film articulates a historical perspective, draws on expert opinions, highlights possible interventions, and empowers the public to take action. The phenomenon abstracted from this context unmasks and exposes a social contradiction between politics and science. The story makes explicit the underlying interests of those in power and why these interests encourage the rejection of scientific evidence. The authors and producers of this film hope that exposure and understanding of this contradiction will lead to anger, ultimately inspiring action and transformation.

The second case is the British science fiction situation comedy entitled *Red Dwarf*. Conversations and topics between the main characters of this series go straight to the heart of social injustice. Similar to the first context, the phenomenon raises awareness of a social contradiction. In this case, the contradiction is between lived experience and the cultural values of equality and justice. *Red Dwarf* uses humor to trigger reflection on how serious social problems are framed by dominant institutions. Is poverty the result of a personality deficit? Or, is poverty the result of social conditions that inscribe life chances? If poverty can be framed as an individual problem, this contradiction can be reproduced, maintained, and naturalized—benefitting the dominant group and cementing current power relations. Not until poverty is viewed as a cultural and historical social condition will it be changed. The writers of *Red Dwarf* hope that over time, as the consumer becomes engrossed in the series, new interpretations of

poverty, and other social problems, will take the blame off of individuals and place them on social systems. Since social systems are based on political interests, what originally appeared as natural, is now interpreted as historical, and therefore, changeable.

The third case is an American stand-up comedian of South Indian descent, Hari Kondabolu. Kondabolu's script uses emotion to raise awareness of colonialism, racism, misogyny, and inequality. His talents as a comedian create a platform where Kondabolu is able to reach a wide audience. In fact, over the past three years, the *New York Times*, NPR, *The Guardian*, PBS, *Vice*, the *Washington Post*, and *Wired* magazine have all run feature stories on Kondabolu. These stories headline with questions and statements such as, "He makes white privilege a punch line; will America get the joke?" (Ramanathan, 2016); and "Hari Kondabolu is the best political comedian you don't know yet" (McFarland, 2016). Kondabolu's latest album, *Mainstream American Comic*, debuted at number 1 on the iTunes comedy chart and number 2 on the Billboard comedy chart last summer (Ramanathan, 2016). Again, the phenomenon raises awareness of a contradiction between lived experience and cultural values such as justice and equality. By doing this through comedy, Kondabolu is using emotion to create a more involving, sticky story—one that can be more easily remembered and disseminated. This case is different from the previous cases in that Kondabolu's stories remind the listener that contradictions arise from the everyday and are reproduced by mainstream Americans living their lives.

Societal contradictions emerge from cultural production in two ways. First, there are always contradictions between new cultural forms and the previously established social formations (Benson, 1977). Second, as the Birmingham theorists recognized, capitalist development is often disorganized and fragmented. Social production in one segment of society may contradict social production in another segment of society. Both types of contradictions are

important since they produce crises, enhancing the possibility of transformation. The experience of ruptures, or injustice, triggers anger, despair, and frustration; this emotion is important since it can bond participants needed to energize new social movements and serve as a catalyst for thinking and action. Fractures open space for freedom.

4.2 Emotions

This is the second concept of our dialectical model. In recent decades, critical theorists and sociologists have overlooked the swirl of emotions that are so important for social transformation (Goodwin, Jasper, and Pollette, 2000). Yet, feelings of anger, despair, and hope, arising from experiencing social contradictions, may be key in triggering the critical imagination. We, therefore, position emotions in the tension between structural contradictions and the development of a progressive literacy.

Emotions fuel resistance and protest and may serve as an integrating factor for new social movements. Emotions motivate agents, are generated in crowds, are expressed rhetorically, and shape explicit and implicit goals. They can be means, or ends, and can sometimes fuse the two (Jasper, 2011). What starts out as a feeling of discontent may eventually become understood critically as a wider social problem (Mills, 1959). These kinds of feelings, therefore, set in motion structural processes necessary for transformation. Indeed, it was Hegel that said the unhappy consciousness is the source of progress (Bronner, 2011). Three popular culture cases help to contextualize this concept.

Singh Street Style is a British-based fashion label launched by Pardeep Singh Bahra (Pinto, 2013). The fashion label features amateur male models displaying a range of fashion styles and sensibilities (Pinto, 2013). Bahra's choice of models and styles, however, always adhere to one specific detail—they must wear a Sikh turban. Following the 9/11 terrorist attacks,

societal response to ethnic minorities included a rise in religious hate crimes, anti-Islamic sentiment, religious profiling, and stigmatization (Disha, Cavendish, and King, 2011). In particular, the Western world's reconfiguring social imagery of the brown, bearded, turbaned male as an alien threat to society's dominant social norms. This phenomenon raises awareness of how misidentification and terror labeling lead to stigmatization and ensuing pathologies such as anomie and detachment. These pathologies initiate a range of emotions including anger, sorrow, frustration, and discontentment. Goffman (1986) notes that the stigmatized are ostracized, devalued, rejected, scorned, and shunned. Thus, *Singh Street Style* is a creative strategy arising from hurtful emotions to forge new associations.

Teen Vogue is a magazine for young women and girls. Like many traditional magazines for women, it was originally produced and marketed for entertainment. In 2016, the magazine underwent a change in leadership with Elaine Welteroth taking the reins as editor-in-chief. Since then, *Teen Vogue* has become known for more than its coverage of fashion and entertainment. It has also produced content addressing important societal issues, such as access to women's health care, violence against women, mental health, body positivity, LGBTQ rights, Black Lives Matter, religious freedom, and environmentalism (Mettler, 2016). Pushing against an established stereotype suggesting that young women are more interested in glitter fingernail polish than current events, *Teen Vogue* is helping to destabilize and dismantle traditional gender roles. This phenomenon draws attention to a hurtful and unfair stereotype where young women are viewed as superficial, uninteresting, and unintelligent. Again, misidentification creates a spoiled identity resulting in feelings of not being understood, being devalued, and rejected. This triggers anger, contempt, anxiety, fear, helplessness, and powerlessness. *Teen Vogue* is a creative strategy engaging young women with the very social structures that have limited their potential.

The third case is a blog entitled *Black Foodie*. Created by Eden Hagos, this is a blog exploring the liberating potential of ethnicity and food. Specifically, Hagos is interested in understanding the world of food through a uniquely black lens. Over time, the blog has developed into a new social movement with over forty contributors highlighting African, Caribbean, and Southern cuisine (Quammie, 2016). In an interview with *Metro News*, Hagos proposes that cuisine is one way the diaspora can maintain a positive connection with their roots (Ngabo, 2016). By rediscovering, and rejoicing in, their traditional dishes, stereotyped ethnic groups find everyday ways of integrating and strengthening their communities. This phenomenon can be described as the articulation of Black identity through the use of cultural objects as embodied sociocultural history. By emphasizing values through objects that have been historically repressed, negative stereotypes can be unmasked, releasing potential. Here, the focus is on negative stereotypes, emotional responses, and creative strategies encouraging reflection and the articulation of subject position. Similar to the other cases contextualizing this theme, *Black Foodie* draws attention to the important role different types of emotions play in the process of social change.

There are two different types of emotions triggered by the phenomena described in these cases that are important for explaining our processual theory of social change. The first are *reciprocal* emotions (Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta, 2000; Jasper, 1998). These are affective ties that bring people together around a common purpose. Reciprocal emotions integrate social movements by creating feelings of friendship and belonging, inspiring loyalty and allegiance. This is the glue, creating solidarity, holding the new social movement together. These positive emotions help to generate conversations and dialogue needed to turn struggle and sacrifice to passion and meaning. Emerging from the thrill of collective expression, resistance, and protest,

they foster a sense of purpose and longevity. For example, the creators of *Singh Street Style*, along with the designers and male models, all feel a sense of purpose and belonging that bring energy and excitement to the project.

The second are *shared* emotions (Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta, 2000; Jasper, 1998). These are feelings held by the group at the same time, but they do not have other group members as their objects. Here, the group nurtures a common anger, or outrage, over experiences and events. Shared emotions express the common exasperation, rage, and disgust over the contradiction between lived experience and cultural values such as equality and justice. The three cases described in the first theme of *contradictions*, and the three cases here drawing attention to *emotions*, are all highlighting the effect of prejudice, intolerance, unfairness, inequity, sexism, racism, and so on. The emotions that these injustices trigger inspire and motivate the search for ways of thinking that will lead to solutions and social change. Reciprocal and shared emotions reinforce each other, helping to build a movement's culture. These emotions prompt and encourage the kind of reflection needed to create a progressive literacy.

4.3 Progressive Literacy

The third concept of our dialectical model is *progressive literacy*. This concept focuses on how emotional reactions to injustice motivate and inspire new ways of thinking and reasoning. A cognitive dimension is crucial to emancipation in that critical reflection transforms what appears to be natural into something historical, and therefore changeable. This process of demythologizing is sometimes referred to as critical pedagogy. This is an approach to awareness concerned with transforming relations of power from the bottom-up (Kincheloe, 2005). Its purpose is to humanize and empower subjects. Three popular culture cases help to contextualize this concept.

S-Town, arguably the most popular podcast to date, has nearly two million subscribers (Hess, 2017). *S-Town* is a podcast hosted by Brian Reed. In the podcast, Reed travels to Woodstock, Alabama to investigate an alleged murder. Podcasts have steadily increased in popularity due to their unobtrusive nature, inexpensive production, and ease of access. Anyone can create a podcast. For these reasons, podcasts have become a vehicle for raising awareness of particular issues. *S-Town* follows the host to rural America, describing experiences as he immerses himself in an intriguing and surprising culture. The aim of the story is to describe rural America in such a way as to strip away the superficial veneer, leaving a curious complexity in its place. Since the format of *S-Town* resembles a novel more than a news story, the podcast is able to build suspense, link to emotion, and retain its audience. As the story unfolds, thick description nurtures empathetic understanding, enabling the listener to critique superficial meanings, first impressions, and dominant myths. Motivated by emotions, the cognitive phase of our dialectical model has the potential to raise new questions, challenge hegemonic ideologies, and undermine repressive beliefs.

World of Warcraft is a popular online video game in which players collectively interact in a fantasy setting to explore, complete quests, and work together to defeat monsters. It is estimated that over 100 million consumers globally have played the game, making it one of the most popular online video games of all time (Whitbrook, 2014). In 2005, an accident occurred with the game that led to serendipitous insights into epidemic management. This problem began when a character was introduced in the game for players to defeat. The character could cast a spell, called *Corrupted Blood*, on players that would spread to other players in proximity. *Corrupted Blood* was essentially a disease that would cause sickness, and eventually, death. A mistake in the code allowed the disease to persist as players left the area. When players traveled

to the large cities to trade in markets, or join adventure groups to begin a quest, they were unknowingly contagious—an online epidemic quickly broke out. As players began to realize what was happening, online social relations mimicked real life experiences. Some players avoided cities, some became sources of information and warned players to stay away, some learned how to heal and became doctors, some committed suicide, and some knowingly passed the disease on to others. The phenomenon of the virtual network allowed epidemiologists to study the cultural nature of disease and begin discussions on how to prepare for global pandemics (Balicer, 2007). *World of Warcraft* helped medical anthropologists and social network theorists begin to understand how medical catastrophes might be managed. It has also helped researchers design new ways of how to study the phenomenon. This type of problem posing pedagogy involves uncovering reality in new ways, ultimately providing awareness of creative interventions, which may improve life conditions.

The third popular culture case is the first widely used augmented reality application, *Pokémon GO*. This application was released in 2016 and quickly gained popularity. Around the world, consumers walk across cities and countrysides, eyes glued to their mobile phone screens, hunting for virtual creatures that appear at certain real-world locations. *Pokémon GO* created a lively media debate on potential benefits (e.g., social integration and solidarity, physical fitness, and connection to charities) and risks (e.g., trespassing, getting hit by a car, and walking off a cliff). The phenomenon focuses attention on the cultural potential and social role of augmented reality. Augmented reality enhances one's capacity to reimagine space, disrupting normalized expectations. Given that the public sphere is stage managed by corporate power, this encourages critical reflection on hegemonic ideologies. In this way, augmented reality becomes a type of

pedagogy, inspiring participants to become aware of their life conditions and social injustices (Wong, 2016).

The cases used to contextualize this theme all disrupt taken-for-granted understandings, creating the possibility for creative insight. In this way, they share the same phenomenon—a progressive literacy that fosters the sociological imagination. Progressive literacy, or a critical pedagogy, is most strongly associated with the Brazilian educator and activist Paulo Freire (1970/1973). Freire (1970/1973) combines the tenets of critical theory with Ivan Illich’s (1972) critical discourse on education to create a progressive literacy. His overarching objective is to help students move from being *objects* of education to *subjects* of their own autonomy and emancipation (Aliakbari and Faraji, 2011). Progressive literacy asserts that all learning must be fundamentally tied to a struggle for a better life for all through the construction of a society based on nonexploitative relations and social justice (McLaren, 2017). By uncovering the ties between the power structure and day-to-day experiences, creative ideas for action begin to emerge. This brings us to the last concept in our dialectical model, praxis.

4.4 Praxis

The fourth concept in our dialectical model is *praxis*. Praxis is an ancient Greek word referring to actively engaged in by free people. This meaning was expanded by Aristotle’s three basic human activities: thinking, making, and doing (Smith, 1991/2011). Thus, “praxis” means practical reasoning. This meaning of praxis was expanded a second time by critical theorists. When this concept is used theoretically from the perspective of Marxism, neo-Marxism, and the Frankfurt School, it connotes *theory-driven action*. This underscores that understanding is not enough: thinking needs to be combined with doing. Praxis engages in, and intervenes, directly in some aspect of society—it is activism struggling to change established social patterns. On the

one hand, this resolves contradictions and remedies social problems. On the other hand, new social arrangements create new contradictions and the dialectical process begins anew. In this way, our processual theory of transformation is a continuous spiral advancing human potential and the critical imagination. Please refer back to Figure 1: Processual Model of Transformation. Three popular culture cases help to contextualize this concept.

Ebony Horsewomen Incorporated is a nonprofit action-oriented intervention designed to foster social inclusion, meaning in life, self-worth, self-confidence, hope, healing, and transformation (Bozzini, 2016). On their website, the owners note: “Equine-assisted therapies are applied through understanding how trauma, familial histories, culture, socio-economic status, and many other factors impact an individual. Humans are not isolated and the challenges which they endure should not be secluded either” (Ebony Horsewomen, 2018). Advocates of hippotherapy argue that horseback riding has therapeutic purposes, which have productive and measurable results. This case serves as an illustration of social practice that may have direct positive impacts on society. *Ebony Horsewomen, Inc.* focuses primarily on a vulnerable population: children raised in low-income communities where drugs, crime, violence, abuse, and neglect are everyday experiences. Although changing these social conditions is profoundly challenging, involving action-oriented interventions across multiple agents of socialization, hippotherapy is designed to interrupt distressed narratives, prompting new thoughts and reflections. This experience may open the door to a different way of thinking, feeling, and being, which leads to new goals and decisions.

Supa Cent is a New Orleans-based social media maven who documents her daily life through video. This includes a range of life experiences including managing a branding business, highs and lows of relationships, personal challenges, life advice, child rearing, and more. *Supa*

Cent's popularity grew exponentially, and she now uses her social media platform to produce video brand promotions for small black business owners, including cosmetologists, musicians, fitness instructors, and culinary services (Chhabra, 2017). Social media influencers act in the gray area between traditional celebrity endorsements and casual brand mentions using platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat. Since it is less invasive, it is viewed as non-commercial and, therefore, more authentic. This phenomenon draws attention to the way that social connectors reinvest in the community by supporting other small businesses owned in similar low-income areas. It is a social intervention that addresses poverty—boosting the economy. In this way, influencers have the potential to act as agents of social change.

The third popular culture case is *Triple j's Hottest 100* annual music poll. This poll has been described as the world's greatest music democracy (ABC News, 2017). *Triple j* is a government-funded Australian radio station targeting youth aged 18-25. The Hottest 100 annual poll is a list of the best songs of the year, occurring in January for the previous year's song releases. In 2016, 2.1 million votes were cast from participants representing 172 countries. For musicians, appearing in the Hottest 100 list generates more sales than other industry awards (Moskovitch, 2016). For those listening to the Hottest 100, this is a cultural ritual entwined with the symbolism of Australia Day, youth culture, and popular music. It is important to note that the Hottest 100 poll engages marginalized identities and demographic groups such as teens, minorities, and Australian aboriginals. The phenomenon abstracted from this context is that the poll has become a signifier for identity politics. It triggers critical reflection demythologizing a traditional and hegemonic view of Australia Day. From the perspective of indigenous Australians, Australia Day is actually *Invasion Day*. The poll is, therefore, an intervention,

highlighting the ability of the arts to act as an agent of change, influencing, and promoting, the political and social discourses of historically repressed groups.

The cases used to contextualize this theme all struggle for action by intervening in the cultural flow of the social system. In this way, they share the same phenomena: action leading to change. Thus, praxis emphasizes the relationship between cognition and action—how one thinks about social arrangements and how one contributes to the social reproduction or change of these arrangements. Progressive literacy helps to increase understanding and awareness of how established social patterns and structures are linked to political interests and power relations. Making these linkages explicit undermines their sense of inevitability and reveals possible mechanisms of transformation.

5.0 Discussion and Conclusions

Based on the interpretation of the twelve cases used to contextualize four themes, popular culture may encourage empathetic understanding, disrupt negative stereotypes, spotlight injustice, and challenge traditional narratives. Thus, popular culture has the potential to be progressive, opening the possibility for social change and the inspiration to drive it. The purpose of this paper was to present a processual theory of transformation, which can explain, harness, and mobilize, this potential. Our processual theory begins with *contradictions* between lived experience and cultural values. Contradictions fuel a range of *emotions* since injustice and inequality create conditions for domination and suffering. Emotions are powerful motivators; they encourage understanding, new ways of thinking, and a *progressive literacy*. This cognitive dimension is needed to unmask the connections between the current social arrangements and political interests. Investigating these connections reveals new possibilities for *praxis*, or theory-driven action.

This processual theory of transformation is different from traditional critical theories in two ways. First, traditional critical theory argues that social movements are needed for social change. This type of organized group action empowers oppressed populations enabling them to confront power relations (Porta and Diani, 2006). More recent discussions of critical theory (Best and Kellner 1997) suggest that *new* social movements have replaced social movements as the harbinger of change. Although new social movements recognize the fragmentation associated with the postmodern condition, and an emphasis is placed more on human rights and identity politics (as opposed to economic well being), they still emphasize organized collective action. Popular culture is dispersed and commercialized, and therefore part of the market system. This was exactly why Marcuse (1964) was pessimistic about its potential. Yet, as the Birmingham theorists would argue, if the text is open, it is possible that consumers can create alternative interpretations and actively struggle to create new cultural experiences. This encourages the emancipatory impulse releasing the potential of the critical imagination. Second, traditional critical theory emphasizes the relationships between contradictions and praxis. Yet, an analysis of popular culture cases reveals the key roles of emotion and cognition. Indeed, it is the interplay between various types of emotion and thinking that drives our processual theory.

The processual theory presented in this paper contributes to TCR in three ways. First, given the importance of social change for this tradition, the theory is *descriptive* and can therefore be used to better understand and explain social change, or lack of change, post hoc. Second, the theory is *prescriptive* in the sense that the theorist, or social analyst, can use the key concepts of the theory to better understand how to activate and drive social change. Finally, the method of theory construction used in this paper serves as a paradigmatic example for one avenue of theory development relevant to a progressive subdiscipline situated in consumer

research. Developing the theoretical capacity of TCR deepens the field, opening new possibilities and building bridges to other progressive tendencies. In this way, it fosters the cogency and resilience of transformative consumer research.

Returning to our illustrative example in the introduction, in 1971, when Motown was releasing Marvin Gaye's *What's Going On*, America was in turmoil. Women, African Americans, Native Americans, gays and lesbians, and other marginalized groups were fighting for justice and equality. America's youth were fighting in the streets to protest the ongoing war in Vietnam. Student riots and unrest continued at most major universities after the Kent State shootings. Actions of the "New Right," culminating with the resignation of President Nixon, weakened people's faith in institutions. For Gaye, *What's Going On* was not a question; it was a statement and message to Motown: time to grow up and take a look at what's going on (Morey, 2016). Of course, this interesting event is part of a much larger story; rock and roll influenced daily life, fashion, ideology, protests, race, religion, and social causes. It permeates the everyday lives of people in society. John Storey (2015) argues that popular culture emerged from the urbanization of the industrial revolution. In this sense, it is both a reflection of the social and political climate, and an agent of social change, reinforcing and instigating progressive tendencies. How can consumer researchers interested in social transformation learn from popular culture? How can we better understand and mobilize this potential? We hope that our contribution to this conversation also serves to spark new ideas, leading to dialogue and debate on the role of popular culture in social change.

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Figure 1

Processual Model of Transformation

